



Endesha Ida Mae Holland

“

A child does not need to dwell in her mother's house forever to be a loyal daughter, I realized, or stay in her birthplace to remember where she's from.

— From the Mississippi Delta (1984)

”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1944
- * African-American poet, scholar, and playwright
- * Member of the Civil Rights Movement

Biography

In the year 1983, Ida Mae Holland added Endesha to her name after she met Dr. Maulana Karenga, a scholar of African history and culture, who is also the creator of Kwanza. Dr. Karenga proved to be an exceptional influence on Holland's life in that he helped her to identify with her personal history. Holland added this name not only to distinguish herself from her mother (for they shared the name Ida Mae) but also to symbolize the way she had motivated herself and others to reach beyond where they came from. Endesha is a Swahili word that means "Driver -- she who drives herself and others forward" (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 308). This name embodies all that Holland stands for and all that her memoir *From the Mississippi Delta* describes. She is a woman who drove herself through terrible odds to pursue and obtain her dreams.

Holland tells her life story in her memoir *From the Mississippi Delta*. "In it, readers hear Holland's voice, rich in Mississippi expressions, tell how she overcame a bleak childhood -- thanks to education, the Civil Rights Movement, and the love of her mother" (*Precinct Reporter*, A-2). She was born on August 29, 1944, in Greenwood, Mississippi. She spends much time describing the poverty and oppression felt by those living in the small African American community of Greenwood before the Civil Rights Movement.

This page was researched and submitted by Shelly Nichols, Jenny O'Neil, and Grace Ryan on 7/22/02.



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She grew up not knowing for certain who her biological father was. Her strong-willed, single mother, Ida Mae Holland (Aint Baby), raised Endesha with her brother, Simon Redmond, Jr., who lived in Minneapolis until his death in 1992, her older sister Jean (Holland) Beasley, who currently lives in Minneapolis, and one of Endesha's mother's sister's children, Charlie "Bud" Nellums.

In her memoir, she tells of her trials and tribulations that seemed inescapable. Holland was raped by her mother's employer on her eleventh birthday, turned to prostitution at age twelve, was kicked out of school in ninth grade, and was pregnant and in jail at age sixteen. Her mother constantly reminded Holland that she could shape her own future. Through her own determination and the drive that she had to make something of her life, Holland eventually turned things around, joined the Civil Rights Movement, moved to the Twin Cities, and began college at the University of Minnesota.

In her memoir, Holland speaks about her accomplishments and takes much pride in them due to her difficult time in obtaining them. Holland graduated with her BA in African American studies in 1979, thirteen years after she started. She received her Masters Degree in American Studies five years later. "I could've stopped there," she says, "but when I looked back down the ladder at how far I'd climbed, it seemed foolish to not go the distance, to become if I could the 'third doctor lady' -- not just to follow in Mama's footsteps, but to make a new path all my own" (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 308).

Thus, two years later, Holland was awarded her PhD on May 25, 1985, from the University of Minnesota. This was the moment that she had been waiting for her entire life. She invited everyone that she knew to come see just how far she had traveled from the Mississippi Delta. Just before she was awarded her doctorate, Holland added Endesha to her name. This was a defining moment because all that she had driven herself towards had finally been attained.

Aside from her highly esteemed memoir, Holland also wrote seven plays. The three that have received the most recognition are *From the Mississippi Delta*, *Second Doctor Lady*, and *The Reconstruction of Dossie Ree Hemphill*. The latter two were written about Holland's mother Ida Mae. *Second Doctor Lady* is the story of her mother's struggle to become a midwife. *The Reconstruction of Dossie Ree Hemphill* also tells the story of her mother but from the perspective of her peers. *From the Mississippi Delta* was inspired by her memoir. This three-woman play has been performed across the country and has received many positive reviews.



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These works have led Holland to receive many prestigious awards including the First Annual Playwriting Award, the ACTF Student Playwriting Award of the University of Minnesota, the Second Place Lorraine Hansberry Award, and she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Also, the mayor of Greenwood, Mississippi, dedicated a day to her, calling it “Endesha Ida Mae ‘Cat’ Holland Day” on October 18, 1991.

Holland’s mother was an powerful influence in her life. Holland constantly sought her mother’s approval and nothing was good enough until Mama said it was good enough. Holland’s mother was a midwife and this did not come without struggle. Because of her race, she was not allowed to work in the hospital and was only allowed to make house calls. This, however, was not an issue because there was never room for blacks at the hospital anyway. She had to work to earn the respect of the people of the community and the professionals in the hospital because she did not know how to read or write and had no formal education.

She worked her way to become the only woman who would be called if someone in the area was having a child. This was an inspiration to Endesha Holland in that she saw just what could happen if a person was determined to live her dream. Her mother told her, “Don’cha never gi’e your own dear dream up. You gotta start somewheres, an’ a dream is jest as good a place as any!” (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 51). Thus, her mother set the precedent that hard work and dedication yield rewards.

Also, although Holland did not realize this until her mother was gone, she became aware of the influence that her mother had on her life. This forced her to reflect on the fact that she herself became a mother at a very young age and that she needed to be that strong, supportive mother for her son.

The theme of education runs throughout Holland’s writing as a way to express the importance of her personal struggle to educate herself. Her mother was depicted in the memoir as a uncompromising woman who wanted nothing more than to see her children succeed and educate themselves. When Holland began to have trouble in school, her mother scolded her, “How many times do I gots to tell you, Ida Mae? You gots to git out in de sky -- up high -- an’ fly wit’ de birds. De white folkses was gwine put our education in de sea ‘til somebody say dat us colored folkeses be strong ‘nough to swim out dere to git it!” (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 67).



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She was well aware that the only way for her daughter to succeed in this world and to overcome oppression was to educate herself. Although her mother was not an educated woman herself, she understood the power that knowledge held. Holland empowers herself and her readers by telling her story: from her journey as a child in the Delta who could not care less if she knew how to read or write, to receiving her Ph.D. in American Studies, and finally to her position as an esteemed author and playwright.

The day that she realized the value of education and the power it gave her was the day that she joined the Freedom Riders' movement. This group was an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement. They staged numerous rallies and protests in order to change the patterns of oppression against the African American community. This particular branch of the group focused on voter registration drives in Greenwood. She was immediately taken in by these activists solely on the basis that she knew how to read and write. Holland felt that this was the day that her academic journey and discovery of herself and her culture's oppression began. Through her involvement with the Freedom Riders, Holland develops another theme of her writing. She spent countless nights in jail and in prison due to the creative charge of "parading without a permit" which was essentially disturbing the peace in masses.

Holland dedicates herself to putting the word out about the importance of African American voters by joining in and leading the protest or parades. She most appropriately titled her thesis *The Autobiography of a Parader Without a Permit* because of her passion for and commitment to the Freedom Riders' movement. In her thesis, she outlines the impact that the Civil Rights Movement and its supporters had on her. She says, "I didn't know until the Civil Rights Movement came that the place I occupied -- my lifestyle -- could ever be different" (*The Autobiography of a Parader Without a Permit*, 11).

Over the course of her life, Holland progressed from being a naive child who accepted her standing in society to being a believer in and activist for change, freedom, and all other aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. Although Holland spends most of her writing discussing how she was personally affected and how she changed because of the Movement, it also brought change to those around her. She influenced the people of Greenwood to use their rights and to obtain education.



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Throughout the memoir, the words spoken by Holland's mother, Ida Mae, are written out in what could be classified as Black English. In order to make the language stand out to the reader, Holland uses it sparingly throughout her memoir. The reason that she wants people to notice this language and to equate it with her mother is that her mother embodies Greenwood, Mississippi, and the entire Delta.

The people there were undereducated, poverty stricken, without medical care, oppressed, and unaware that there was a method available for them to obtain a more gratifying future. This language illustrates how easy it was for white people to look down upon African Americans because of their lack of understanding and ability to use Standard English. The oppressors viewed Black English as an uneducated form of Standard English. Throughout her writing, Endesha Holland uses Black English to illustrate the severe split between the education of the dominant and minority cultures.

In the end of her memoir, Endesha Holland talks about being asked if she wishes she could change anything about her life. Holland answers, "Take your pick!" (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 312). Although Holland is aware that she did not live a life that provided easy opportunities, she is thankful that these events occurred because they had a part in shaping who she has become as an individual and as a writer. "Everything has a past, and these things are a part of mine. They've shaped my view that our time on this sad and happy earth is a gift. I can't change them, but I can share the wisdom they have given me" (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 313). The wisdom that Holland wishes to share with those who choose to read her works is simple, "The world began when you were born. It will be whatever you make it" (*From the Mississippi Delta*, 313).



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